

TAKE NOTES

Activate Prior Knowledge

This selection is filled with quotable phrases and sentences that express Thoreau's philosophy of life, or the beliefs that guide his life and his actions. Do you have a philosophy of life? Can you express this philosophy in one sentence?

Reading Strategy

In this selection, Thoreau uses long sentences and an old-fashioned style to **state his philosophy** of life. Read the selection slowly, sentence by sentence. Break down each sentence as you read it. Then, try to summarize the sentence in your own words. For example, reread the sentence in brackets. Using the footnote to help you, write a summary of the sentence below.

Literary Analysis

The way a writer puts thoughts into words is called that writer's style. Thoreau wants his readers to look closely at the way they live, so he builds to a climax, or high point of interest, at the end of each paragraph. Reread the first paragraph of this selection. How is the underlined part of the sentence the climax of this paragraph?

from Walden

Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau has become a hero to environmentalists because of his commitment to nature. Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, has been designated a National Historical and Literary Landmark. The site of the cabin where Thoreau lived in the woods is a popular tourist attraction.

from Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry¹ with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it—took everything but a deed of it—took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk—cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a sedes, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there might I live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard woodlot and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow² perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms—the refusal was all I wanted—but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell Place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to

1. **husbandry** (HUZ buhn dree) *n.* farming.

2. **fallow** (FAL oh) *adj.* left uncultivated or unplanted.

carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife—every man has such a wife—changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheel-barrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes:

“I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute.”³

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas,⁴ to take the world on my

Vocabulary Development: dilapidated (di LAP uh day tid) *adj.*
in disrepair

3. “I . . . dispute” from William Cowper’s *Verses Supposed to Be Written by Alexander Selkirk*.

4. **Atlas** (AT luhs) from Greek mythology, a Titan who supported the heavens on his shoulders.



Literary Analysis

A figure of speech that talks about one thing as if it were something else (without using the words “like” or “as”) is called a **metaphor**. In the underlined sentence, Thoreau uses a metaphor to compare writing a poem about a farm to milking a cow. Circle the words in the sentence that refer to milking a cow.



Reading Strategy

Thoreau’s description of the attractions of Hollowell farm gives you an opportunity to **evaluate the writer’s philosophy**—that is, to form your own opinion of the writer’s beliefs and values. List below three things that Thoreau likes about Hollowell’s farm. Then, write what these things tell you about his philosophy, or his beliefs and values.

1.

2.

3.

TAKE NOTES

Reading Strategy

Consider the underlined sentence and **evaluate the writer's philosophy**. What does Thoreau mean? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Stop to Reflect

Think carefully about what you have learned so far about this writer's philosophy of life. Then, reread the bracketed section. How does Thoreau's description of the house compare with Thoreau's philosophy? How would you feel about living in such a house?

Reading Check

When does Thoreau begin living in the woods?

shoulders—I never heard what compensation he received for that—and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale (I have always cultivated a garden) was that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted.

It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.

Old Cato,⁵ whose "De Re Rustica" is my "Cultivator," says, and the only translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage, "When you think of getting a farm, turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good." I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last. . . .

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer⁶ in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weatherstained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral⁷ character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a traveling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed

5. Old Cato Roman statesman (234–149 b.c.). "De Re Rustica" is Latin for "Of Things Rustic."

6. **chanticleer** (CHAN tuh kleeer) *n.* rooster.

7. **auroral** (uh ROHR ul) *adj.* resembling the dawn.

over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus⁸ is but the outside of the earth everywhere. . . .

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike⁹ as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹⁰

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes:¹¹ it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the

Vocabulary Development: **sublime** (suh BLYM) *adj.* noble; majestic

superfluous (soo PUR floo us) *adj.*
excessive; not necessary

evitable (EV uh tuh buhl) *adj.* avoidable

8. **Olympus** (oh LIM pus) in Greek mythology, the home of the gods.

9. **Spartanlike** like the people of Sparta, an ancient Greek state whose citizens were known to be hardy, stoical, simple, and highly disciplined.

10. “**glorify . . . forever**” the answer to the question “What is the chief end of man?” in the Westminster catechism.

11. **like . . . cranes** in the Iliad, the Trojans are compared to cranes fighting against pygmies.

TAKE NOTES

Reading Check

Why does Thoreau go to live in the woods?

Reading Strategy

Consider the underlined sentence and **evaluate the writer's philosophy**. What does Thoreau mean? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Literary Analysis

Consider the sentence “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” Why does Thoreau use this **style** of writing—repeating a word three times and ending with an exclamation point—at this point in the paragraph? Before you answer, look again at the other sentences in the paragraph.

TAKE NOTES

Stop to Reflect

Thoreau says that the nation lives too fast. We are living even faster now than people were when Thoreau was alive. What are the advantages and disadvantages of living life as fast as we do?

Literary Analysis

Reread the underlined sentence, noticing that a stream is a **metaphor** for time. Read the next few sentences and explain the metaphor in your own words below.

Reading Check

Why does Thoreau think that all his best faculties are concentrated in his head?

bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning,¹² and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,¹³ made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers,¹⁴ and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. . . .

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod¹⁵ and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine. . . .

12. **dead reckoning** navigating without the assistance of stars.

13. **German Confederacy** at the time, Germany was a loose union of thirty-eight independent states, with no common government.

14. **sleepers (SLEE perz)** *n.* ties supporting railroad tracks.

15. **divining rod** a forked branch or stick thought to reveal underground water or minerals

from The Conclusion

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pondside; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. . . .

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute? We will not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a heaven of blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be sure to gaze still at the true ethereal heaven far above, as if the former were not? . . .

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The faultfinder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows



Reading Check

Reread the bracketed paragraph as a strong example of Thoreau's **style**. Notice that Thoreau begins by talking about his own life. Then he generalizes about the world in the last sentence. Explain the **metaphor** in the last sentence of this paragraph.

Literary Analysis

Consider the underlined sentence. The idea of hearing a different drummer is one of Thoreau's most well-known thoughts. **Evaluate Thoreau's philosophy** in these sentences. Do you agree that it is all right for someone not to keep in step with his companions? Why or why not?

Reading Check

Why does Thoreau leave the woods?

TAKE NOTES

Stop to Reflect

Thoreau encourages his readers to love their lives even if they are poor. He even says that the poor in his town live the most independent lives. What questions would you like to ask Thoreau about his view of poverty?

Reading Strategy

Consider the underlined sentence. **Evaluate Thoreau's philosophy** in this sentence. Do you agree that you do not need money for things that are necessary for the soul? Why or why not?

Literary Analysis

Thoreau's **style** includes many striking thoughts that make interesting individual quotations. Circle your favorite phrase or sentence on this page.



of the almshouse¹⁶ as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they are above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret¹⁷ all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me. The philosopher said: "From an army of three divisions one can take away its general, and put it in disorder; from the man the most abject and vulgar one cannot take away his thought." Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself to many influences to be played on; it is all dissipation. Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights. The shadows of poverty and meanness gather around us, "and lo! creation widens to our view."¹⁸ We are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of Croesus,¹⁹ our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being a trifle. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul. . . .

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream

Vocabulary Development: magnanimity (MAG nuh nim uh tee)
n. generosity

16. **almshouse** *n.* home for people too poor to support themselves.

17. **garret** (GAYR it) *n.* attic.

18. "**and . . . view**" from the sonnet "To Night" by British poet Joseph Blanco White (1775–1841).

19. **Croesus** (KREE sus) king of Lydia (d. 546 b.c.), believed to be the wealthiest person of his time.

anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets. Everyone has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum²⁰ of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!

I do not say that John or Jonathan²¹ will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

20. **alburnum** (al BER nuhm) *n.* soft wood between the bark and the heartwood, where water is conducted.

21. **John or Jonathan** average person.

Reader's Response: Do you want to read more writings by Thoreau? Why or why not?

Thinking About the Skill: How has **evaluating the writer's philosophy** helped you understand Thoreau? How will it help you understand other selections in the future?



Literary Analysis

One characteristic of Thoreau's **style** is to tell a story to illustrate the point he wants to make. Retell the story of the "strong and beautiful bug" in your own words. What is the point of this story?

Reading Check

What do you think Thoreau means when he says, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake"?
